

# PREVENTION THROUGH DETERRENCE ALONG EGYPT'S NORTHEASTERN BORDER



Ellen Morris

## Or the Politics of a Weaponized Desert

### ABSTRACT

Throughout its history, Egypt's governments were concerned at its northeastern border both to keep would-be fugitives in and to keep would-be migrants and invaders out. Adopting a system of structural violence that bears similarity to America's policy of Prevention Through Deterrence on its southern border, the government fortified and policed the easiest points of entry across its official borders. Beyond that, however, it guarded water sources and relied upon the North Sinai desert to kill or grievously injure any intruders that ventured to cross it. This article considers the parallels between policies of border control in ancient Egypt and those currently practiced by the United States government with respect to Mexico. Moreover, it argues that the Sinai desert served as a shatter zone for the Pharaonic state and that local residents thus had the power either to sabotage or to bolster the efforts of a regime to secure its border.

**KEYWORDS:** Sinai, border, violence, walls, canal, Bedouin, fugitives

### Prevention Through Deterrence

Although the mechanics of Pharaonic border control are relatively well known, the inherent structural violence of the system remains unaddressed. This article seeks to highlight the Egyptian state's delegation of violence along its border to a whole host of non-human actors by comparing the Pharaonic system to the current policy of Prevention Through Deterrence as it is practiced along the boundary that divides the United States and Mexico. As shall be seen, the Egyptian state, like its American equivalent, relied for border control not only on walls and other physical barriers but also on the harsh environment that lay just beyond them. The article considers the effects of this present-day policy in an effort to deepen our understanding of its ancient equivalent. It also examines the manner in which the Bedouin of Egypt's Sinai desert, like the Samaritans, smugglers, and bandits that now frequent the Sonoran desert and other such locales along the U.S.-Mexican border, occupy an ambivalent position as actors who, depending upon their motivation, might facilitate dangerous passages or else prey upon those seeking to cross unaided.

Since 1994, the United States government has practiced a policy of border control known as Prevention Through Deterrence. Due to the thousands of deaths that have thus far resulted from its adoption, activists have criticized the strategy, seeking to unmask the

structural violence that it entails (De León 2015). At its core, the policy mandates that any portion of the border that can be crossed with relative ease should be walled and surveilled. This is a marked departure from earlier practices in which the border between the two countries was porous, fences being either nonexistent or else far more symbolic than effectual. Thus, in times past the emphasis lay not on catching people as they crossed, but rather on apprehending those who sought to reside permanently in the United States without permission.

Under the provisions of Prevention Through Deterrence the government erected hi-tech fencing and radically increased the numbers of border control agents in order to thwart those that attempted to climb over, cut through, or tunnel under a fence. As the name of the policy implies, however, walls comprise only a portion of its equation. The effect of the walls, which provide a barrier for roughly a third of the 3,145 km border, is to funnel would-be migrants into harsh and waterless terrain or to force them to cross dangerous waterways. As the architects of this policy acknowledged, “Illegal entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land and sea along the border can find themselves in mortal danger” (U.S. Border Patrol 1994: 2). The numbers of documented deaths per year between 1998 and 2008 ranged between 356 and 529 (Jimenez 2009: 18). Utilizing these statistics, by the start of 2017 the numbers of documented dead would be approximately 8,000. Untold numbers of corpses swept away by currents or devoured and scattered by scavengers remain uncoun- ted.

The United States’ adoption of this policy had much to do with a sharp spike in illegal immigration resulting in part from changes subsequent to the adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which put many Mexican farmers out of work. Prompted by a convergence of hardships, Mexicans and other southerners began to cross the border in unprecedented numbers and prompted the United States to take a much harder-line stance toward immigration than had been the case in the past.

The hardships that provoked a large-scale migration of Canaanites into Egypt at the end of the third millennium BCE appear to have been primarily ecological

rather than economic. The effects, however, may have been similarly dramatic. This increased immigration, if the “pessimistic literature” of the period may be trusted, prompted a societal outcry and resulted in attempts by Egypt’s government to more effectively cordon off the country’s northeastern border.

About border control in and before the Old Kingdom we know very little, having no archaeological evidence and only a handful of enigmatic references in surviving texts. There was presumably some effort to keep people in the country, judging both from the emphasis on surveillance at large-scale work sites like the Giza Workmen’s Village and from later penalties imposed upon those who sought to avoid *corvée* labor. Keeping people out of the country, however, does not seem to have been a pressing concern. The free and relatively modest city-states of Canaan posed little threat, and one might perhaps safely assume that living under the heavy hand of the Egyptian state was not viewed as desirable so long as Canaan had fertile fields, orchards, and flocks that could grow fat off the fruit of the land.

This situation may well have changed, however, around 2500 BCE, when increasing aridity throughout Africa and the ancient Near East caused the collapse of the Early Bronze III urban culture in Syria-Palestine and made life far more tenuous for anyone occupying a marginal area (Höflmayer 2015). The effects of this climate change on Egypt’s environs are visible in art as early as the Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2480 BCE) in scenes carved on the pyramid causeways of Sahure and Unas (Fig. 1). Here the suffering of desert peoples during this extended period of drought is purposefully contrasted with the plenty enjoyed by those lucky enough to live by the banks of the Nile—that is, until Egypt’s own floods began to fail.

Economic hardship and perhaps also upheavals related to the process of de-urbanization in Canaan seem to have prompted many Easterners to resettle in the Nile Delta. Thus, by the time Egypt’s central government collapsed at the end of the Sixth Dynasty and low Niles caught up with already existing arid conditions, Egyptians may have found themselves competing for resources with those they viewed as cultural outsiders (Hassan 2007: 359–60). Egypt’s first foray into virulent anti-immigrant xenophobia, then, came during the First Intermediate

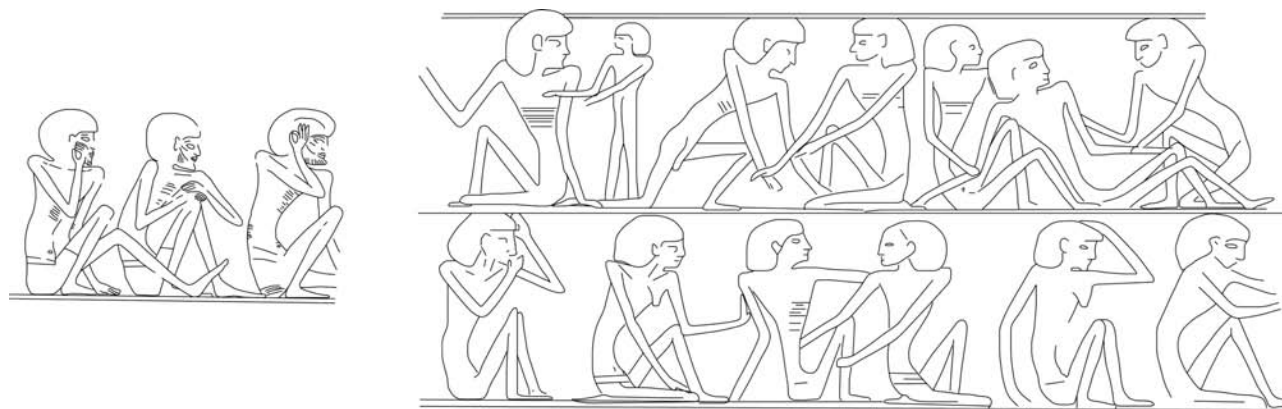


FIG. 1

**Starving Bedouin from the causeways of Sahure (left) and Unas (right).** (Redrawn from Hawass and Verner 1996: 185, fig. 2a and Drioton 1943: 49, fig. 3.)

Period at the end of the third millennium BCE. The authors of the so-called pessimistic literature aimed to capture the tenor of the times for tendentious purposes of their own. Thanks to present-day recessions, increased migrations, and inflammatory political invectives, however, the recorded rhetoric rings fresh, and there is no reason to suppose that the prevailing sentiments were entirely invented.

A purported eyewitness named Ipuwer, for example, laments that “Verily, the desert pervades the land, the nomes are annihilated, and foreign aliens have come to Egypt. . . . Moreover, all the foreigners claim “This is *our* water! These are *our* crops!” (Simpson 2003: 192, 193). According to Ipuwer, “Foreigners have become Egyptians in every place. . . . And nomads are (now) experts in the professions of the Delta” (Simpson 2003: 190). A similar situation is “predicted” by a fictional sage named Neferty, who foresees that “Foreign birds will breed in the Delta marshes, having made their nests beside the people, for men have let them approach through laxness . . . And the land is plunged into anguish by those voracious Asiatics who rove throughout the land” (Simpson 2003: 217). Digested into a familiar sound bite: The crisis at hand was that foreigners had entered the homeland, were committing depredations or taking profitable jobs that would otherwise have been filled by nationals, and were successfully insinuating themselves into society. According to the narrators of these texts (and, no doubt, the political

agenda of those that sponsored them), the land required an enterprising ruler to stem this tide.<sup>1</sup>

### Barriers with Teeth

Attempts to deal with this unwanted immigration are first articulated, in literature at least, by a ruler of the kingdom that held the northern portion of the country in the late First Intermediate Period. This king—in all likelihood a member of the family of Khety—purportedly left a document to his son Merikare in which he explained his philosophy on ruling justly, touted his successful policy decisions, and (uniquely for an Egyptian king) expressed regret for his mistakes. Among his successes as ruler, he cited his three-pronged approach to staunch this tide of illegal immigration.

First, he levied troops to round up foreign populations that were considered dangerous. He destroyed their settlements, captured their people and their cattle, and did this until he had made them “detest” Egypt (Simpson 2003: 161). Second, he encouraged large-scale settlement in the Eastern Delta. As he put it, the region was now “well settled with towns and full of people, the choicest of the entire land, to drive back any attacks against them” (Simpson 2003: 161). The new settlers in this project of internal colonization, then, were given tax-free status in order to compensate them for agreeing to inhabit a

dangerous frontier zone. Their walls were fortified, and their soldiers, citizens, and serfs, were given training in war so that they knew how to bear arms, should they come under siege. In point of fact, however, as the king stated, the likelihood of them having to mount such a defense was remote. For, as he put it, “the Asiatic is only a crocodile on its riverbank, which attacks on a lonely road but does not invade the area of a crowded town” (Simpson 2003: 161–62).

The third prong, however, was the most important for present purposes. The border itself had to be sealed, such that those who hazarded the journey across the Sinai land bridge would be stopped, dead in their tracks as it were, at the border. To this end, the king advocated the use of canals edged with what he described as warlike walls. The text and toponyms here present some difficulty to the translator, but it would appear that the king was suggesting that the key to Egypt’s defense against the eastern bowmen was to construct a canal that traversed vulnerable points of entry. To make this happen, water could be diverted from the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, from various canals, and from a number of brackish lakes and lagoons.

Portions of a canal that would have served just this purpose were identified in the 1970s, although their date remains uncertain. This canal ran from the ancient shoreline somewhat near what was to become Pelusium southward, cross-cutting the easternmost tip of the Delta. Eventually, this canal led to El Balah Lake and then south to Lake Timsah (Fig. 2). The western perimeter of the frontier canal was in all likelihood edged by a substantial wall, whose bricks were made from the mud excavated to form the canal. The “Walls of the Ruler,” as the earliest defenses were known, are referenced in a variety of ancient documents (Shea 1977: 35–38; Hoffmeier 2006).

It is quite probable, however, that this border security system, when fully constructed, relied less on the strength of its fortifications than it did on the viciousness of its crocodiles. The well-watered southernmost passage out of Egypt, the Wadi Tumilat, ended abruptly in a lake whose modern name is Lake Timsah, or Crocodile Lake. This body of water was brackish but marshy and offered an ideal environment for crocodiles. The presence of crocodiles in such a vital strategic

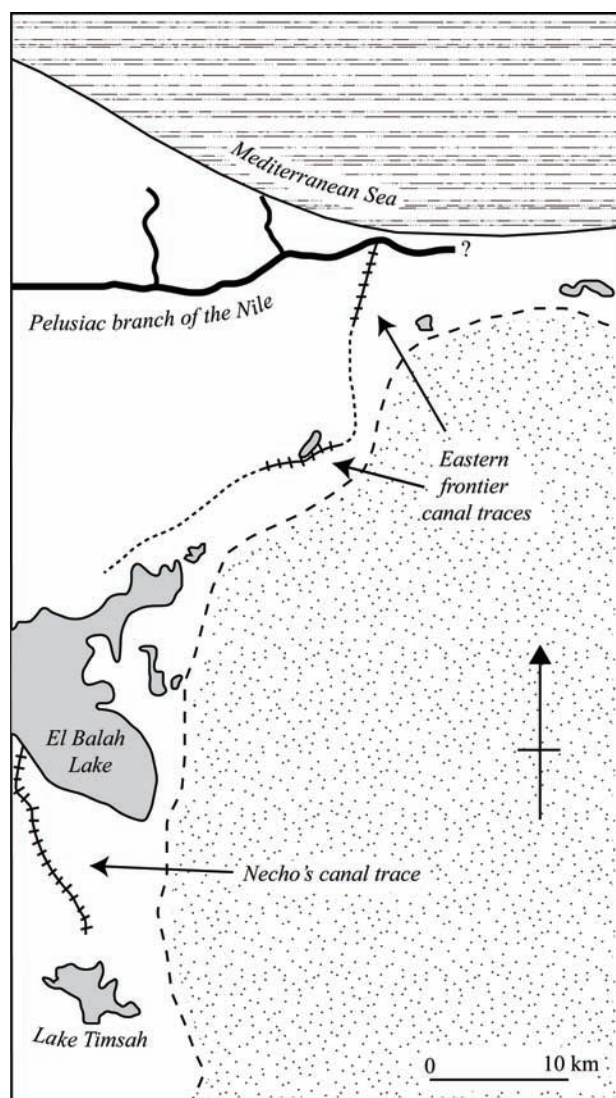


FIG. 2  
Map showing Pharaonic canal traces and the ancient coastline.  
(Redrawn after a map produced by the Geological Survey of  
Israel in Hoffmeier 2006: 3, fig. 1.)

location may not only have been tolerated, it may, perhaps, have been encouraged. Certainly, a waterway positively crammed with crocodiles, labeled “the dividing waters,” appears in a schematic rendering of Egypt’s border defense system, as it existed during the reign of Seti I (ca. 1290 BCE; see Fig. 3). Recent excavations have revealed that the fortress of Tjaru (Hebua II) was indeed separated from an unnamed counterpart to its west (corresponding to the right side of the waterway



in Fig. 3) by a Nile distributary that could easily have supported a robust population of crocodiles (Shea 1977; Hoffmeier 2013: 168–69).

The employment of crocodiles as *de facto* border control agents is observed elsewhere. For example, the crocodiles that frequent the Limpopo River, which separates Zimbabwe and Mozambique from South Africa, are acknowledged—along with lions, electrical fences, and land mines—to be one of the most important checks on cross-border migration. According to news reports, border police patrolling this river routinely find corpses partially devoured, some cached in caves by crocodiles (Fields 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, death by crocodile constituted a particular horror in the Egyptian mindset, and the punishment of being thrown to a crocodile is attested in a legal oath as well as in a tale from the late Middle Kingdom or early Second Intermediate Period (McDowell 1990: 174; Simpson 2003: 16).

One particularly vivid account of the danger crocodiles posed to those who forded infested waters can be found in an account of Perdiccas's ill-fated invasion of Egypt in 320 BCE. By all accounts, this campaign was managed disastrously. Briefly, it saw Perdiccas earning

enmity by badly botching an attempt to redirect a canal and by pressing his men to march at breakneck speed during nights that followed difficult days. After his second attempt at making a crossing unopposed, he and his army arrived at a region of Memphis where an island in the Nile seemed to offer hope that the third time might be the charm. (Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 18.33–34)

To ease the passage of his army across the river, Perdiccas came up with a seemingly clever stratagem, namely to place elephants upstream of the wading troops in order to break the force of the current and to place mounted horsemen downstream to catch any soldiers who lost their footing. Although the tactic worked at first, the tread of the animals disrupted the silt causing the bottom of the river to suddenly deepen precipitously. Stronger swimmers made it across with great difficulty, after shedding much of their equipment, but the rest were swept away by the river only to be devoured by crocodiles or drowned and washed up at the feet of the enemy (Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 18.35–36). Not surprisingly, after so many glorious failures, Perdiccas fell to the daggers of his own officers, and the campaign was aborted (Fig. 4).

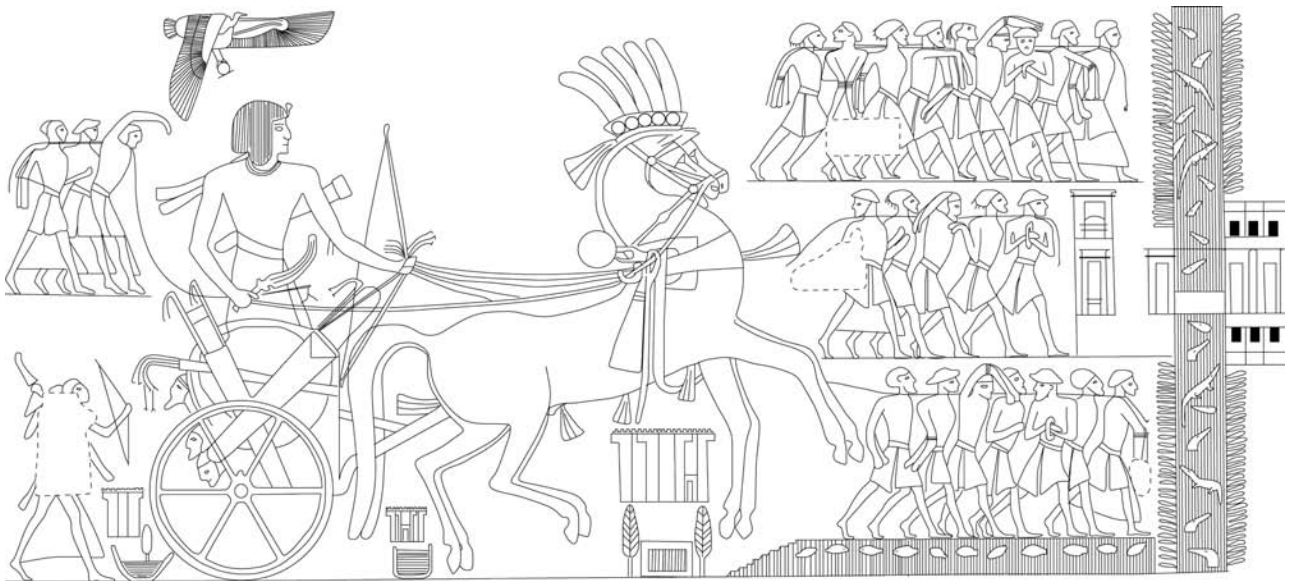


FIG. 3  
Relief depicted on the walls of Karnak temple showing Seti I returning home by way of the militarized highway along the North Sinai from a campaign against the Shasu Bedouin. (Redrawn from Gardiner 1920: pl. XI.)



**FIG. 4**  
Like Perdiccas's soldiers, unsuspecting Roman troops approach crocodiles. (After *Faits des Romains, aux armes de la famille Le Pele*, fifteenth century CE; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Department of Manuscripts, French 22540.)

It is important to note that if the point of entry that Perdiccas chose was deemed the safest spot for a well-equipped Hellenistic army to cross—after the entirety of the eastern edge of the Delta had been reconnoitered—Egypt must indeed have been difficult of access. This was certainly the assessment of classical authors such as Josephus (*J. W.* 4.10.5) and Strabo (*Geogr.* 17.21), and it must have also been the assessment of the leaders and participants of well over 30 (mostly unsuccessful) invasions launched between the seventh century BCE and the first century CE (Figueras 2000: 95–102; Kahn and Tammuz 2008: 39). Deserts protected Egypt to the east and west, and a series of cataracts prevented penetration by river from the south. Even entry by sea was problematic, given the fact that Egypt's coast was both riddled with sandbars and possessed of only a few viable harbors. Fortified on all sides by nature, then, Egypt's few vulnerable points of entry could be secured in a remarkably effective manner from a period quite early in its history.

After their beginnings in the First Intermediate Period, the Walls of the Ruler were significantly augmented by the new Twelfth Dynasty regime that took power around 1990 BCE. It is fascinating and perhaps

counterintuitive that the first individual that we hear of managing to avoid this system and to pass through to the other side was not a foreign bowman desperate to reap the benefits of life in Egypt, but rather a very alarmed courtier, named Sinuhe, who feared being fingered as part of the conspiracy that had recently killed a king. According to this early example of historical fiction, told in the first person, Sinuhe lost no time in heading for the border. He states, “I gave a path to my feet northward (until) I touched the Walls of the Ruler, which had been made to check the Asiatics and to crush the sand-travelers. I took a crouched position in the brush out of fear that the guard on duty on the walls might see. I went by night” (Simpson 2003: 56). To prevent just such an occurrence, desert scouts fanned out in the mornings to read the landscape for signs of illicit passage. Sinuhe, however, evidently covered his tracks.

The fictional courtier thus succeeded in the first stage of his flight. But as the Middle Kingdom security specialists knew, breaking through the Walls of the Ruler was only the beginning of a fugitive's perils. There still remained roughly 220 km of largely waterless terrain that separated him from the sown land of Canaan.



## Crossing a Weaponized Desert

Concerning his journey across the desert, Sinuhe states, “Thirst overcame me and it hastened me on; I was parched, my throat dry. And I said: This is the taste of death” (Simpson 2003: 56). Had it not been for the timely arrival of a group of Bedouin, the fugitive felt that he would surely have perished. Although the narrative is fictional, the power of an arid landscape to maim or to kill those who attempt to traverse it without proper equipment, local knowledge, or aid is well known. The term ‘weaponized desert’ has thus been utilized to describe the employment by policy-makers of wastelands to severely weaken or indeed eliminate migrants before they enter settled regions of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The same term is equally applicable to the use by various governments of the Sinai desert.

Numbering among the weapons in Egypt’s arsenal was quicksand. In and around Pelusium and Lake

Bardawil difficulty was posed to the traveller by marshes, a lack of potable water, and shifting sands. Regarding the latter, Diodorus Siculus reported that crossing the desert in the environs of Lake Bardawil offered unexpected perils to those ignorant of the terrain. Portions of the lake were often covered by dunes and could be mistaken for solid ground. Diodorus wrote that the sand, when walked upon, gave way “but gradually, deceiving with a kind of malevolent cunning those who advance upon it. . . Anyone who has been sucked in by the mire cannot swim, since the slime prevents all movement of the body, nor is he able to wade out, since he has no solid footing” (*Library* 1.30.7–8). Diodorus went on to note that because of this mixing of sand with water the affected terrain could be traversed neither by foot nor by boat. Individual travelers and armies, such as a portion of that led by the Persian king Artaxerxes III in 343 BCE, often came to this realization too late (*Library* 16.46.4–5; Fig. 5).

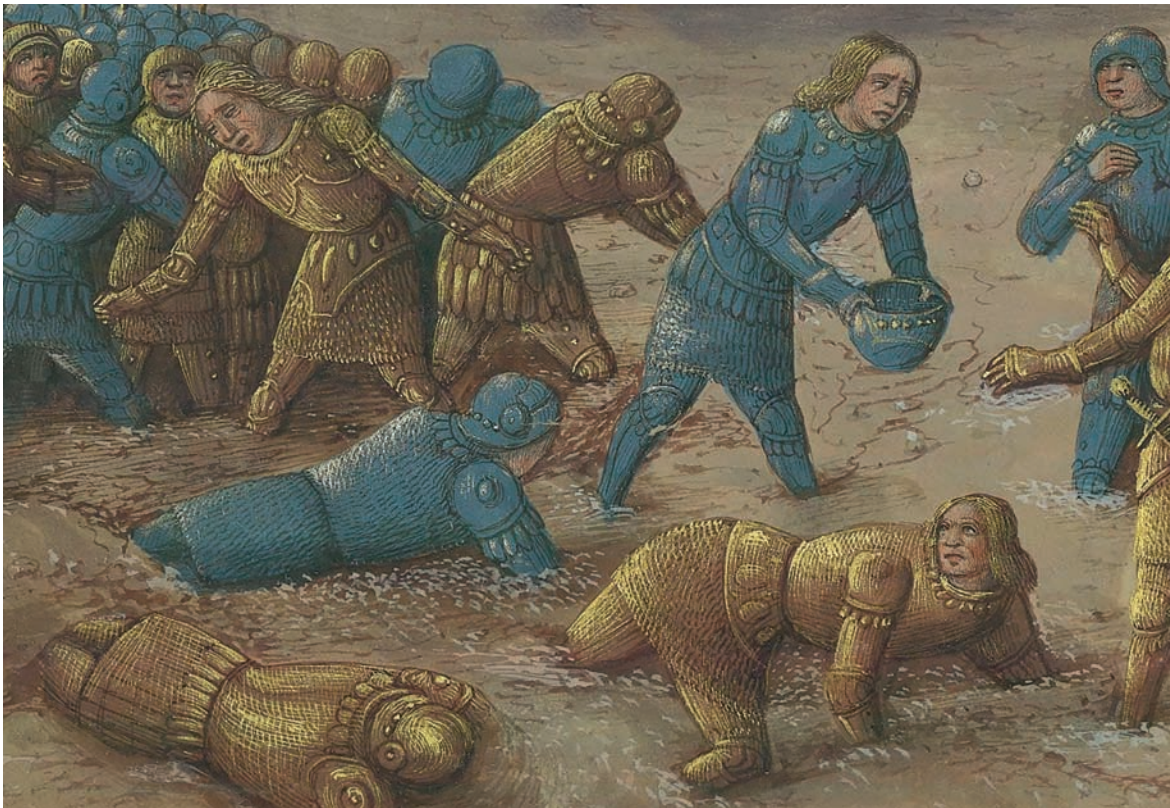


FIG. 5

**Roman soldiers mired in quicksand.** (After Romuleon by Robert Della Porta, fifteenth century CE; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Department of Manuscripts, French 364.)

Quicksand is, of course, not an obstacle encountered in the Sonoran desert by those seeking to bypass the recently erected American walls. Many of the other difficulties encountered by such migrants, however, were indeed shared by individuals who sought to pass over the Sinai desert undetected by state authorities. Such difficulties are well documented, but rarely more eloquently than by Jason De León in his new book, *The Land of Open Graves*. De León, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan, directs the Undocumented Migration Project, which seeks through ethno-archaeological fieldwork to expose the structural violence that lurks behind the bureaucratic language of American foreign policy.

The official description of the Prevention Through Deterrence policy predicts “that with traditional entry and smuggling routes disrupted, illegal traffic will be deterred, or forced over more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement” (U.S. Border Patrol 1994: 7). Questioning the deliberate sterility of this description, De León asks “What hides in the shadows of so-called ‘hostile’ terrain? Flesh-roasting temperatures? . . . What about venomous snakebites or bandits with a propensity for gang rape? Shoes that break apart after staggering in them for miles over lonely mountains? An undiagnosed heart condition exacerbated by days in the desert? Although all of these things (and countless others) have become incorporated into the Border Patrol’s system of enforcement, none of these realities are captured by policy rhetoric” (De León 2015: 39).

Venomous creatures certainly make their appearance in ancient accounts. About the Sinai highway, Strabo states that “in addition to its being waterless and sandy, it contains a multitude of reptiles, the sand burrowers” (*Geogr.* 17.21). The Assyrian king Esarhaddon who crossed the Sinai with his army in the seventh century BCE knew of this first hand and was clearly traumatized by “serpents [whose attack] (spelled) death” and the rather enigmatic “green [animals] whose wings were batting” (Pritchard 1974: 292). Similarly, Lucan reports that Cato the Younger warned his troops in advance of their long march across the Libyan desert west of Egypt, stating, “We march towards barren

plains and the furnace of the world, where the sun’s heat is excessive and water is seldom found in the springs. And where the parched fields are foul with venomous serpents” (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9.382–84). As to the nature of the venomous serpents, Lucan expounded at great length, detailing the gruesome (and gruesomely various) ways in which those who fell to their fangs collapsed and died—always in agony. Indeed, serpents even attacked the soldiers as they slept, attracted by the warmth of their bodies.

In a fitting testament to effectiveness of the desert as its own weapon, Cato’s soldiers purportedly lamented that “[t]he vipers fight in Caesar’s place, and the adders win the civil war” (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9.850–51). Lucan goes on, however, to state that the violence inflicted upon these men was not the fault of nature, for this was a no man’s land, quite literally. He writes, “We are trespassers in a land of serpents: let us pay the penalty to that unknown Power which loathes the traffic of nations, and therefore fenced off a region with a scorching zone on one hand and the shifting Syrtes on the other, and set death in the strip between the two” (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9.859–62).

Crossing the desert at any point made a traveler vulnerable to being caught in a sandstorm, as were Cato’s miserable men. This storm, recounted in detail, stopped his troops in their tracks, before obliterating those tracks altogether (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9.471–96). Crossing the northern Sahara in the spring, however, was especially difficult because of the fifty days of winds, which reached top speeds of 145 km an hour and sent temperatures skyrocketing. Such storms caused great hardships for Napoleon’s troops and also for European troops fighting in North Africa during World War II. They likewise posed hazards to marine travel along an already treacherous shore.

The temperatures in the Northern Sinai too were no help to the traveler, as they range from mostly just over freezing in the winter to as high as 43 °C in July. From late spring until early fall, then, traveling during the day would have placed one at risk of heatstroke and dehydration—the latter state being aggravated by the difficulties obtaining water, as will be addressed momentarily.



The hot sand and stony surface must have made travel across the desert extremely uncomfortable in antiquity, as boots and sandals were, of course, hand made of natural materials, which lacked the durability of their more modern counterparts. Even today, however, such journeys are tough on shoes. De León places an unexpected emphasis on shoes in his work on border crossers because of his belief that shoes are the closest one can get to an archaeology of injuries and to a phenomenology of suffering. Abandoned shoes speak of painful journeys up until the point at which they were discarded, and they speak to an even greater pain thereafter—for no one would think to carry an extra pair of shoes when they could devote space in their rucksacks to water. In interviews with migrants, De León found that those who could not keep up with the group because of blisters and worn out shoes were often left behind—a fate that constituted a veritable death sentence (De León 2015: 180–82; Fig. 6).

While finds of leather or papyrus footwear along the North Sinai transit route have yet to be attested, descriptions of campaign hardships make mention of them. Thus in the late third millennium BCE, an official named Weni boasted that under his watch the soldiers he supervised plundered from those they passed neither bread nor sandals (Simpson 2003: 404). Likewise a New Kingdom satire—meant to discourage scribes-in-training from

dropping out of school for a more glamorous career in the military—states that when a typical soldier was summoned to go up to Canaan, he could expect to find at the border fortress of Tjaru neither sandals nor weapons of war (Caminos 1954: 401).

Another item of material culture that De León finds with great frequency on his archaeological surveys are backpacks and other belongings that are abandoned by increasingly distressed travelers who need to lighten their loads. Backpacks are important, of course, in that those wishing to cross a border surreptitiously generally do so on foot, and it is nearly impossible for untrained individuals to travel at a good pace over long distances with anything much heavier than a rucksack (De León 2015: 147, 190, 206). Significantly, the Egyptian word for wanderers, strangers, or fugitives (*Shemaw*) possesses as its determinative a man walking stooped under a bundle that he carries at the end of a stick (Fig. 7).

Bags and their contents are also, of course, hard to recognize in the archaeological record of the North Sinai. But we do have a telling account of a Libyan leader at the end of the Late Bronze Age, who had entered Egypt illegally with his people in the company of other Libyan groups and also of armed men from the Mycenaean world. At the end of the Late Bronze Age,



FIG. 6

Leather and papyrus sandals from Egypt's New Kingdom juxtaposed with a shoe discarded by a migrant in Arizona's Sonoran Desert.

(Sandals: Sheikh Abd el-Qurna; courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, Rogers Fund, 1936; 36.3.234a, b, and .159a, b.

Photo of Air Jordan shoe by M. Wells, courtesy of the Undocumented Migration Project.)

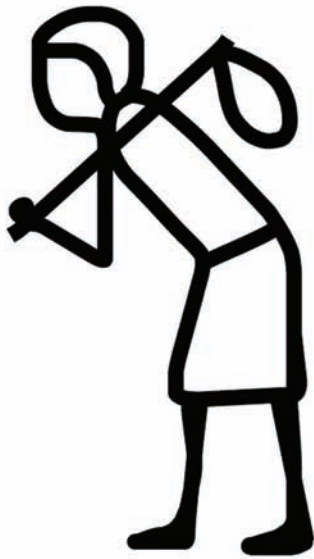


FIG. 7

**Determinative for the Egyptian word for “wanderer” juxtaposed with a backpack and other material abandoned by migrants in Green Valley, Arizona.** (Determinative redrawn from Gardiner 1957: 445. Photo of abandoned belongings by M. Wells, courtesy of the Undocumented Migration Project.)

increasing aridity and famines were wreaking havoc with palace economies far and wide, and, once again, people were on the move. To staunch this migration, forts had recently been built at intervals along the desert coastal road, and fortified towns now lined the western edge of the Delta (Habachi 1980).

This motley group of invaders purportedly entered the Delta in order to “seek out the necessities (of life) for their mouth[s]” and spent their time going about the land “fighting to fill their stomachs daily” (Kitchen 2003: 4). Once Merneptah mounted an army to drive them out, and the battle began to turn against them, however, their leader fled the scene. According to an inscription at Karnak, “The despicable chief of Libu stood in fear, his mind fainting – he stood and then fled(?) . . . [?abandonin]g his sandals, his bow, and his quiver in haste behind [him], and [ever]y thing (that was) with him” (Kitchen 2003: 5). The pharaoh heard reports that the ruler had apparently fled alone at night, incognito—with no plume on his head—and that he had no water in his skin to keep him alive.

Mounted officers had gone off in pursuit but to no avail, and the Commandant of the Fortresses of the West had sent a missive stating that the fugitive had passed by the fortress in the favor of night in safety and that it was not known whether he was alive or dead (Kitchen 2003: 6, 12).

Yet another scenario for dropping one’s belongings along the desert trail is related by the author of yet another scribal satire, who describes what should have been a desirable outcome for a soldier: namely, having returned from a successful battle, loaded with booty that included a foreign woman. But nothing is happy in a scribal satire, save the secure life of a scribe. So, the soldier’s lot gets even harder. The scribe writes, “The foreign woman has fainted through marching and is placed upon the soldier’s neck. His haversack is dropped, and others take it away, (as) he is loaded with a captive-woman.” The hapless soldier does not long survive the extra burden and the loss of his belongings, and in this scenario he winds up “dead upon the desert-edges” (Camino 1954: 402).

Leaving for a trek across the Sinai unprepared was a dangerous business, but even prepared, the journey was difficult. Again, a scribal satire describes the march of a soldier from Egypt up to Syria-Palestine, stating that the soldier's "bread and his water are upon his shoulder like the load of an ass. . . . The vertebrae of his back are bent whilst he drinks of smelly water and halts (only) to keep watch" (Caminos 1954: 92). Another satire in the same vein adds, "he drinks water every three days, and it is smelly and tastes like salt. His body is broken (with) dysentery" (Caminos 1954: 401).

For migrants traveling across the Sonoran desert, dehydration or dysentery—caused by being driven after days of trekking to consume insect ridden water, green with algae from troughs—number among the top three killers, together with hypothermia and drowning (Jimenez 2009: 21; De León 2015: 2, 151). Obtaining access to potable water would also have been a tremendous problem for those attempting to enter Egypt illegally. Interviews with border crossers indicate that most carry only four to eight liters of water, as each liter weighs a kilogram (De León 2015: 147, 271; Richey 2016). Given that it is impossible to carry enough water to survive a four-day trek through the desert, travelers across the Sinai would have needed to refill their waterskins on at least two occasions. Along this stretch of desert, however, wells were not only few and far between, but quality would no doubt have varied greatly. A well that had been befouled would mean death for a traveler who had banked upon its being present and potable.

In Sinuhe's case, just when he was at death's door from dehydration, he was discovered by Bedouin and nursed back to health. Sinuhe's situation would have been much more dire, however, in the New Kingdom, when the Egyptians seem to have made every effort to secure all known water sources with a fortified way station or at the very least with armed guards. This system—immortalized by Seti I on a wall of the temple of Amun at Karnak (see Fig. 3)—allowed Egyptian armies and imperial functionaries to travel quickly and relatively comfortably across the Sinai. Significantly, the reliefs make sure to highlight the presence at each fort of a water source, although the nature of the various sources remains somewhat ambiguous (Gardiner 1920).

Likewise, archaeology undertaken by the Israeli North Sinai survey during the 1970s and 1980s uncovered a granary capable of holding 40 tons of grain at a site known as Bir el-'Abd. While the site's Arabic name implies the presence of a nearby well, archaeologists also discovered a 10 by 15 m catchment for rainwater. Yet another intriguing fort was identified at Haruba site A-289 (Fig. 8). These two installations were located in two of the ten or so clusters of Late Bronze Age date that the Israeli team discovered along the North Sinai transit corridor. Situated roughly a day's-journey (15–20 km) from one another, the clusters typically incorporated some state-built structures, smaller campsites, and evidence of seasonal Bedouin settlement (Oren 1987; Fig. 9). Since the Israeli survey, archaeologists have excavated at the northeastern edge of the Delta, but little large-scale work has been undertaken further east.

### Encounters in the Shatter Zone

Following Israel's return of the Sinai to Egypt, much of its coast has been treated as a militarized border zone. Indeed, following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and the

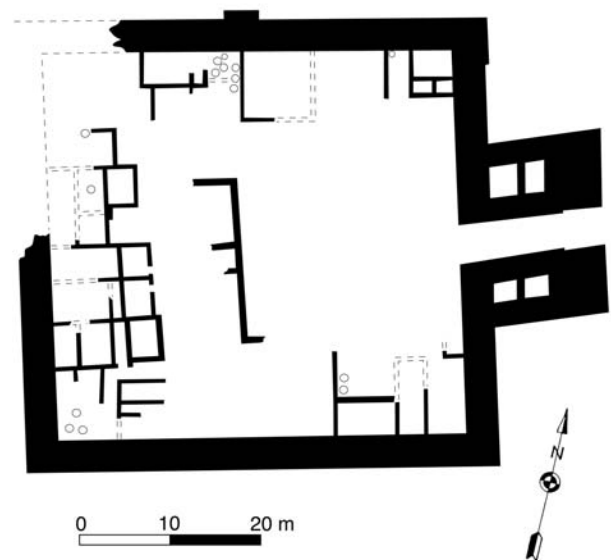


FIG. 8  
Haruba site A-289, Nineteenth Dynasty Egyptian site along the North Sinai 'Ways of Horus' military highway. (Drawn after Oren 1987: 88.)



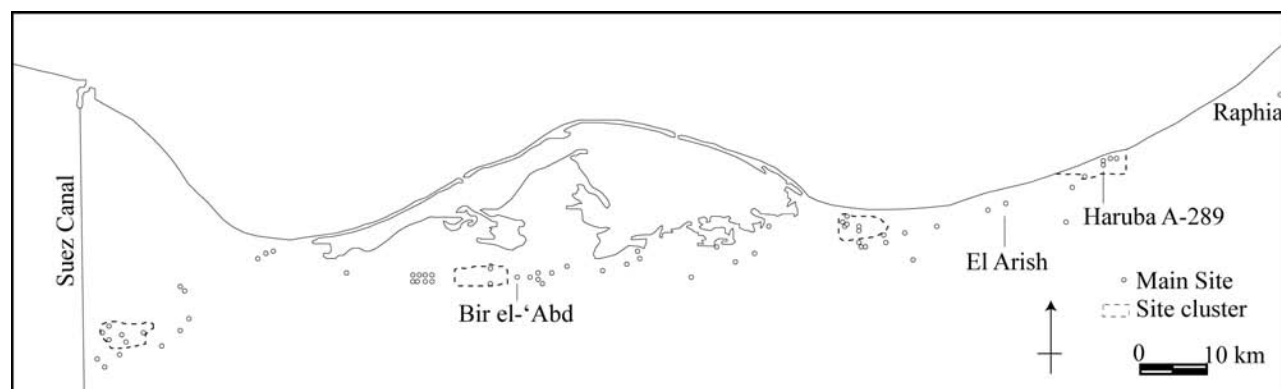


FIG. 9  
Sites along the North Sinai that date to the New Kingdom. (Drawn after Oren 1987: 79, fig. 4.)

rise of the Islamic State, the North Sinai has become a hotspot for insurgents (BBC Monitoring 2016). Local Bedouin are increasingly radicalized both by hardline Islam and, perhaps more importantly, by the prospect of assistance in destabilizing the state and obtaining a greater degree of freedom for their communities. Bedouin in Egypt and in numerous other nations tend to have an uneasy relationship with the state, as state interests—such as securing a stable tax base and keeping tabs on the movements of people and goods across border zones—can conflict with the freedom of movement and the self-determination that constitute core components of both Bedouin identity and economy.

Perhaps as part and parcel of their rebellion against the state, the local Bedouin appear to be indulging in banditry in unprecedented numbers, preying in particular on vulnerable refuge groups from the Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea in a manner quite similar to the way that bandits and smugglers treat border crossers in the Sonoran desert as well as at the far side of the crocodile-infested waters of the Limpopo River (Jimenez 2009: 25, 27; Smith 2008). An article in the online version of *Der Spiegel*, published in 2013, stated that there was virtually no government presence or policing in the region and that it was entirely in the hands of clans—clans that often are at odds with one another (Abé 2013). Thus the Sinai today might well fall under the category known to political scientists as a shatter zone—a region situated at the edges of nations—just beyond where the state’s tentacles can

reach with ease, at least in times of governmental stress. Shatter zones are the regions to which fugitives flee (Scott 2009: 13).

The Sinai’s position at the margins of the Egyptian state likely led to similar dynamics in antiquity. It is no doubt significant, for example, that Sinuhe was saved from death by Bedouin. As he narrated it, “I heard the sound of the lowing of cattle, and I looked upon Asiatics. Their bedouin chief recognized me, a man who had been in Egypt. He gave me water and boiled milk for me, and I went with him to his tribe, and what they did for me was good” (Simpson 2003: 56). What is important to note is that the Bedouin who discovered Sinuhe half dead and recognized him as a high-level Egyptian official did not march him right back toward the border in order to collect a reward. Instead, he provided him with aid, eased his passage across the Sinai, and sent him on his way. This Bedouin, despite having traveled to Egypt on occasion—or perhaps because of it—had no love for the state.

Concerning Bedouin, the First Intermediate Period king who purportedly penned the Instruction for Merikare had this to say: “The vile Asiatic is miserable because of the place wherein he is, shortage of water, lack of many trees, and the paths thereof difficult because of the mountains. He has never settled in one place, but plagued by want, he wanders the deserts on foot. He has been fighting ever since the time of Horus. He neither conquers nor can he be conquered. He does not announce the day of fighting, but is like a thief whom society has

expelled" (Simpson 2003: 161). If Bedouin were prone to acting against the state, this may often have occurred in a more or less passive manner (such as purposefully not turning in a fugitive), but Bedouin also made ideal insurgents. Returning to the aforementioned campaign of Seti I, it is notable that one of its aims was to bring order to chaos when it came to the Shasu Bedouin. The associated texts state, "The Shasu enemies are plotting rebellion! Their tribal leaders are gathered in one place, standing on the foothills of Khor, and they are engaged in turmoil and uproar. Each one of them is killing his fellow. They do not consider the laws of the palace" (Murnane 1990: 40). Yet another passage makes it clear that the hills of the rebels could not be passed on account of the Shasu enemies who were attacking.

The ethnonym "Shasu" in Egyptian can be connected to verbs meaning "to wander," while in Canaan's West Semitic language it bore relation to the verb "to plunder" (Levy, Adams and Muniz 2004: 66). If one factor about Bedouin is that they can neither conquer nor be conquered and that they do not observe proper rules of war, whatever defeat Seti's campaign dealt them had no hope of being definitive. And Bedouin, if they remained hostile to the state, possessed the power to raid its caravans, harass its personnel, and to mire it in small wars indefinitely. Thus for Seti, solving this problem would have been imperative (Fig. 3 depicts Seti I marching his Shasu prisoners of war toward the Egyptian border).

Almost certainly Seti I eventually did what many rulers confronted with similar problems have done, namely struck a deal with the Bedouin to placate them such that they put their desert skills to work for the Egyptians rather than against them (or at least remained neutral). This could most easily be accomplished by hiring them as desert scouts, already a longstanding practice with the Medjay-tribesmen who hailed from Nubia's Eastern Desert. Likewise, there are numerous historical attestations of Egyptians granting Bedouin a tax-free status and also paying them protection for guarding caravans (Stephans 1853: 167, 199). Certainly it is notable that archaeological investigations of Sinai bases show some evidence for the presence of local actors as well as Egyptians (Oren 1987: 94-95). Moreover, a model letter has survived

in which an Egyptian official is roundly chastised for requisitioning Bedouin scouts and hunters unnecessarily. In order to press home the seriousness of his reprimand, the commanding officer warns his subordinate that if he does not desist in this behavior immediately he will be surrendered to this group as their convict—a threat calculated, no doubt, to fill him with fear (Caminos 1954: 176)!

In this respect, a letter sent to the leaders of the Akuyta, a semi-nomadic Nubian group best known for raiding Pharaonic expeditions in the Eastern Desert, is notable. From this letter, sent by the High Priest of Amun around 1100 BCE, it is apparent that Egyptian authorities had sought to convert their enemies into allies. Thus, this group was now being hired to escort and protect teams of gold workers. The letter implies, however, that even after this solution, relations were still not entirely easy. The High Priest reminded these Bedouin of their duty to prevent other Bedouin from attacking workers and warned that they "must not come in order to create disturbance in the land of Egypt" (Wente 1990: 39). Ultimately, however, the High Priest knew—as Diocletian would later come to know about populations in that same area—that carrots produced far more immediate rewards than sticks. For this reason, no doubt, the letter ends with a long list of items, foodstuffs, and livestock that he was dispatching along with the letter.

Such tactics of cooption and appeasement were no doubt politically astute, for just as the Bedouin helped Sinuhe flee Egypt, the very first successful invasions against the country—which were mounted by the Assyrians and Persians—were only successful because their leaders first solicited the help of Bedouin. In his annals, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon described how the king of Arabia provided him with camels loaded down with water containers for his invasion of Egypt in 671 BCE. Even with this help, however, the journey was hard, and the king gave full credit to the god Marduk for keeping his troops alive (Pritchard 1974: 292).

Cambyes likewise, according to Herodotus, sought inside information as to how he should cross the desert. His informer "advised Cambyes to send and ask the king of the Arabians for a safe passage" (Herodotus,

*Hist.* 3.4.3). Their help, as he pointed out, was invaluable as in one “wonderously waterless” stretch of desert, the nearest wells were three days journey apart. Thus the Arab king “filled camel-skins with water and loaded all of his camels with these; then he drove them into the waterless land and there awaited Cambyses’ army” (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.9.1). The fact that Egypt became vulnerable to invasion by land precisely at the point that camels arrived onto the scene in the ancient Near East is no accident. Clearly, however, even without camels, Bedouin could be dangerous if left uncourted, having the power to harass travelers and mount lightening razzias on caravans and settlements.

In the end, Sinuhe managed a successful escape from Egypt. Like an estimated 92–98% of border crossers in the Sonoran desert, he evaded the wall with its border agents, and he survived his trek across the desert (De León 2015: 160). At the time at which he crossed, the Egyptians relied almost exclusively on their wall to make border crossing difficult and on the desert to make it untenable. Successes like Sinuhe’s, however, may have led to the eventual ratcheting up of defenses in an attempt to co-opt all water sources and to close off the border to all unauthorized travelers. In this decision, then, Egypt’s policy makers may have resembled many members of the United States Congress. In a speech given in 2011, President Obama joked that Republican lawmakers were difficult to satisfy when it came to border defense systems. They kept moving the goal posts, first demanding that the numbers of border control agents be tripled or quadrupled, then pushing for the construction of a higher fence, then a moat, and then, finally, to top it off, he predicted that they would demand alligators in that moat.<sup>3</sup> While this is, of course, a fitting hyperbole, it reminds us that among the most brutally

effective of a state’s agents are the vipers and other non-human actors that (still) fight in Caesar’s place.

## Notes

1. For discussions that emphasize the political nature of the literature ascribed to the First Intermediate Period, see Moreno Garcia 1997 and Moeller 2005.
2. See for example Gabe Shivone’s article “Death as ‘Deterrence’: The Desert as a Weapon,” published online for the Alliance for Global Justice.
3. A transcript and video of the speech can be found at <http://nation.foxnews.com/president-obama/2011/05/10/obama-republicans-want-moat-alligators-border>. Accessed December 31, 2016.

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ELLEN MORRIS is an Assistant Professor in the Classics and Ancient Studies Department at Barnard College. She has published extensively on issues pertinent to ancient Egyptian imperialism. Her first book is entitled *The Architecture of Imperialism: Military Bases and the Evolution of Foreign Policy in Egypt’s New Kingdom* (Brill, 2005). Her second, *Egyptian Imperialism*, explores various manifestations of imperialism throughout Egypt’s history from a comparative perspective and will be published by Wiley-Blackwell early in 2018. Her ongoing research interests and other publications focus on the dynamics of political fragmentation, state formation, sexuality and sacred performance, retainer sacrifice, island theory, and divine kingship. She has excavated in the Nile Valley at Abydos and Mendes, and at the site of Amheida in the Dakhleh Oasis. (Barnard College, Columbia University; [emorris@barnard.edu](mailto:emorris@barnard.edu))



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